

Stuck for Christmas stocking ideas? Look no further than our cracking gift guide. We round up 27 gadgets and treats that are sure to keep loved ones entertained

Christmas is almost upon us again, and with it comes the usual raft of philosophical considerations. Is the institutional celebration of Christmas relevant or appropriate in our multicultural society? Does the rampant commercialism detract from what is an essentially spiritual celebration? What on earth should you buy for your brother, his wife, her sister and her great uncle Boris?

Every month we review the best electronic devices and gadgets, from digital video cameras to MP3 players, in our *What's New* section. Many of these would make a great gift for the geek or geekess in your life. But when buying for a younger relative or friend, you might want something a little more frivolous.

To help you pick out the perfect stocking filler, we've put together 27 fun gift ideas from several top online retailers. Have a browse through our gift guide, and you should be able to find at least a few things for your family – and maybe a couple for yourself. And best of all, you won't even have to venture near the high street.

176 COMPUTER SHOPPER • JANUARY 2006

www.computershopper.co.uk

Stuck for Christmas stocking ideas? Look no further than our cracking gift guide. We round up 27 gadgets and treats that are sure to keep loved ones entertained

Christmas is almost upon us again, and with it comes the usual raft of philosophical considerations. Is the institutional celebration of Christmas relevant or appropriate in our multicultural society? Does the rampant commercialism detract from what is an essentially spiritual celebration? What on earth should you buy for your brother, his wife, her sister and her great uncle Boris?

Every month we review the best electronic devices and gadgets, from digital video cameras to MP3 players, in our *What's New* section. Many of these would make a great gift for the geek or geekess in your life. But when buying for a younger relative or friend, you might want something a little more frivolous.

To help you pick out the perfect stocking filler, we've put together 27 fun gift ideas from several top online retailers. Have a browse through our gift guide, and you should be able to find at least a few things for your family – and maybe a couple for yourself. And best of all, you won't even have to venture near the high street.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

NEEDAPRESENT USB Lava Lamp

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £7 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.needapresent.com

The Lava lamp was invented in the 1960s and has become synonymous with that decade. They are much prized for the relaxing light show they create. This tiny lava lamp connects to your computer via USB, so you can keep calm at work or chill out at home.

Rather than the usual blobs of molten wax, this lamp uses glitter. Once up and running, the glitter in the lamp moves round slowly. In a darkened room it casts dim but pretty patterns on nearby surfaces. It'll make a great gift for anyone who likes to use their computer in the dark.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

CAN YOU IMAGINE Airzooka

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.iwantoneofthose.com

The Airzooka is a simple but effective toy weapon. It's a plastic tube with a sheet of thin plastic over the back. You pull back the sheet, and when you let go elastic pulls it into the tube, pushing air out of the other end. This ball of air shoots across the room and into your bemused target. No batteries, no mess, no damage.

The ball of air isn't that powerful, but we did manage to scatter paperwork and surprise passing colleagues. It works best when you catch your victim unawares and whistle a shot just past their ear. Buy two for only £20 and have an Airzooka war.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

PHOTONLIGHT Photon Micro-light

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

Most keyrings are useful only for identifying their owner's last holiday destination. The Photon Micro-light is far more useful, as it contains a torch.

The single blue LED will run for up to 14 hours from two replaceable lithium batteries. The manufacturer claims that the beam is visible at distances of over one mile. We can't verify this, but it is extremely bright. It's perfect for peering inside PC cases when looking for a fault.

The Photon is tiny, with a good battery and a low price. Many people would find it useful, and it looks pretty good, too.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

WOW STUFF USB Fan

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £8 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

The average desktop PC contains a number of fans to keep it cool, so why not add one for yourself? Even in winter, a constant stream of air can help take the stuffiness out of central-heated rooms.

The off-white and silver colour scheme will particularly please Apple computer owners. The blades are made of rubber, so accidental collisions are pain-free. The stem of the fan is flexible and can be positioned in any direction. It gives off a satisfying light breeze, which can aid concentration at the end of a long day. The only downside is the constant whirring noise it creates, which is louder than many PCs or notebooks.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

FIREBOX Rock Beat Drumsticks

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

For too long, air guitarists have led the way in pretend musicianship, with a world championship and dedicated CD compilations. Meanwhile tabletop drummers have lurked on the fringes, branded as annoying and repetitive.

Rock Beat Drumsticks do nothing to improve this image. Motion sensors let you drum the air to create a range of unconvincing sampled drum noises. We found it hard to put together a drum solo. A slave galley rhythm, however, was easy to produce. Buy these for a young person at your own risk; the noise will drive you to despair within days.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

RADICA 20Q

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

This little toy plays 20 questions with you. Think of something and 20Q will ask a series of questions before trying to guess what it is. There are four buttons allowing you to respond yes, no, sometimes and unknown.

In our tests, it succeeded in guessing laptop computer, chess piece and handcuffs. But it mistakenly identified Santa as Superman, and failed to get anywhere near Buddhism. It often plucks the right answer from nowhere after lots of seemingly unrelated questions, and even when it's hopelessly wrong there's still entertainment to be had. A highly recommended stocking filler.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

CAN YOU IMAGINE Desktop Air Conditioner

RATING ★★

PRICE £9 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

If you get hot and stuffy at your desk, this may be the answer. The simple design uses no chemicals. A removable bottle is filled with water and placed in the freezer to turn to ice. You then put the bottle back in the unit, and a battery-powered fan pushes air past it and out into the room.

In use it isn't that convenient or terribly effective. Freezing the water bottle is impossible for many office workers, and is a chore for those at home. The resulting cool air flow is minimal, and the fan is very noisy. Not as cool as it sounds.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

FIREBOX USB Xmas Tree

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

Many modern PCs come with up to six or eight USB ports. This can leave owners perplexed as to what they are all for. Come Christmas, however, it becomes clear: you can fill them with seasonal nonsense such as this little tree.

Shopper's dingy basement lab was given a festive air by the introduction of this plastic pine. It changes colours in a gentle manner, and put us in the perfect mood for a Christmas holiday. If your office lacks Christmas spirit, this could be just what you need. After Christmas, just pop it in a drawer – there are no pine needles to clear up.



REVIEW £10 OR UNDER

WOW STUFF SIM Card Saver

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £10 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

Many of us use mobile phones as our day-to-day address books, but far fewer keep a copy of those crucial numbers elsewhere. If you don't save a copy of your address book, losing your mobile phone could mean losing contact with friends and clients.

The SIM Card Saver is a handy little device that can copy up to 256 contacts from your SIM card. Your contacts are stored on its internal flash memory and can be written back to another card if needed. It's not the most exciting gift, but one day it could prove invaluable.



**REVIEW** £12 TO £30

EFX Magic Stirring Mug

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £12 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.efx.co.uk

For centuries teaspoons have been sufficient for stirring hot drinks. With this in mind, we couldn't see any need for a battery-powered mug that stirs your drink for you. Surprisingly, though, the Magic Stirring Mug is a revolution in beverage preparation.

Press the button on the handle and a tiny propeller whisks up your drink. It creates a vortex so strong that you can see down to the bottom of the mug as the liquid is thrown outwards. We tested with tea, hot chocolate and Cup-A-Soup. Only black coffee drinkers will be immune to its charms; everyone else should buy one immediately.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

I WANT ONE OF THOSE Liquid Mouse

RATING ★★★

PRICE £14 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.iwantoneofthose.com

The Liquid Mouse sounds like an incredible next-generation control device, using a highly advanced fluid control system. In reality, it's just a mouse with a fish in it. Not a real fish, either, but a plastic one that bobs about in bright blue fluid.

Other than its novelty value, this is a basic optical mouse. We used it for a day and it gave us no problems. The ergonomics and the feedback from the scroll wheel aren't up to the standards set by Microsoft or Logitech, but it's usable. Fish fans will love it, but others will be bemused.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

COMMODORE Commodore C64 Plug n Play

RATING ★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

We remember the days of eight-bit computers fondly. Much time was spent waiting for creaky old tape recorders to load a game. Fortunately, you can now play 30 assorted Commodore 64 games when you want.

Unfortunately, the games don't pass the test of time. It's not the graphics that are the problem, but the frustrating and unresponsive controls. There are too many incomprehensible adventure games and not enough simple arcade titles that can be easily picked up. Street Fighter II (opposite) is far more fun.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

BOYNQ USB Lamp

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £13 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.needapresent.com

We've seen quite a few USB lights before. Most of them are dull silver affairs that are practical if not particularly exciting. This USB Lamp from Boynq is a kitschy reworking of the usual design, complete with a tiny lampshade.

The device plugs into a USB socket, but looks a lot like an old-fashioned table lamp. It doesn't give out a lot of light but creates a warm glow suitable for late-night computing. The on/off switch is a neat addition.

Our only concern is the price; we can't imagine many people paying £13 for such a tiny glow.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

BOYNQ Cubite

RATING ★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.gadgetter.com

The Cubite is a small box that contains stereo speakers and a USB hub, and is ideal for connecting to a notebook computer. It's finished in Apple-friendly white, but doesn't look so smart alongside black or grey PCs.

It doesn't work very well, either. The speakers sound muffled and are lacking in bass. They reminded us more of a radio alarm clock than of a hi-fi. The four-port USB hub supports only USB 1.1, so although you can connect USB Hi-Speed devices, they won't run at full speed. At this price, you'd be better off buying some speakers and a separate USB hub.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

FEONIC Soundbug

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

The Soundbug is a tiny portable speaker with a difference. About the size of a computer mouse, it attaches to a hard, flat surface such as a desk using a suction cup. When you play music it vibrates, turning that surface into a huge speaker. Tables and windows work particularly well. It requires three AAA batteries and has two volume levels.

The sound quality isn't excellent, but it sounds better than many cheap speakers. It's also smaller than many portable speaker sets and fits easily into a laptop bag. Good for travelling music fans or just for people who like to collect strange gadgets.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

HELA USB Massage Ball

RATING ★★

PRICE £13 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.needapresent.com

Usually keeping something simple is a good idea. Simple products are easy to use and simplicity also helps to keep costs low. This massage device goes a step too far, though, by omitting any control over the strength of the vibrations it produces.

We hoped that the Massage Ball would be useful to ease the discomfort of tired muscles. Unfortunately, its vibrations are a bit too vigorous. It is so strong you can barely think while using it and your whole body tends to vibrate in time. With a speed control this would be great; without one it's just too powerful.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

BOYS STUFF Keyboard Desktop Tidy

RATING ★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

The average office desk can turn into a bit of a mess, making it hard to find a Biro when you need one. The Keyboard Desktop Tidy could be the solution. It's a PS/2 keyboard that hinges open, revealing useful storage space for all your essential bits and pieces.

The storage area is limited but useful. You can fit a lot of stationery and about seven CDs or DVDs into it. Unfortunately, the keyboard itself is appalling, with little travel and poor feedback from the keys. Only those who are truly desperate for storage space would put up with typing on it.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

LOGITECH Cordless Rumblepad 2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £25 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.mediaatlantic.com

Because of all the free time and dreary weather, Christmas is perfect for playing computer games. A mouse and keyboard are fine for first-person shooters or strategy titles, but most action and sport games are best played on a joy pad.

This Logitech pad is a similar shape to Sony's PlayStation 2 controller. The two analogue sticks have a good feel, but the digital pad is a bit loose. Installation was a breeze; we simply plugged in the USB receiver and it worked perfectly. A well-designed joy pad to enhance your Christmas gaming fun.



REVIEW £12 TO £30

HASBRO I-Dog

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

I-Dog is a robotic dog that you feed music to keep happy. He can pick up music through his external microphone, or using a mini-jack line in.

Apparently I-Dog's personality is affected by the kind of music you play him. We fed ours a constant barrage of banjo music for eight hours. It seemed to keep him happy, although he thought it was techno.

I-Dog communicates using seven different multicoloured lights on his head. The patterns and colours of these lights tell you if he is hungry for attention or music. Not exactly a laugh a minute, but strangely endearing.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

MR SITE Your Own Takeaway Website

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.boysstuff.co.uk

Websites can be complicated to set up. This all-in-one product removes all the hassle of buying a domain name and building a site. First you choose a .com domain name, then you pick a template for your page. We had a basic site online in 10 minutes.

It includes up to 20 email addresses and 150MB of web space. It also offers message boards, shopping cart functions and 2GB of bandwidth per month. After the first year, it costs just £2.50 a month to maintain. A well-thought-out product for those who want an online presence with no fuss.

REVIEW £12 TO £30

RADICA Street Fighter II

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

The Street Fighter series dominated arcades in the early 1990s. Now you can bring that arcade experience, minus the cigarette butts and sticky carpets, into your living room. This version is the Sega Megadrive conversion of the arcade original. You choose a ludicrous character with a deadly range of special moves and challenge your friends to a virtual punch-up. There is a solo mode, but the game really shines with a human opponent.

It plays perfectly on the six-button joy pads included, which are both responsive and comfortable to use. A real classic of its era and still very enjoyable today.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

FREECOM DVB-T USB Stick

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £50 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

Christmas is the season of goodwill, except when it comes to television scheduling. You can avoid those family viewing disputes by using your PC or notebook computer as an extra television set.

This USB tuner picks up Freeview channels and can record programmes to your hard disk. You can even pause live TV, freeing up time to eat dinner without missing that essential repeat of *Only Fools and Horses*.

Setup is straightforward as the drivers and software install from one disc. You'll need a proper aerial connection to get the best out of it, though, as the bundled mini aerial isn't up to much.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

AIR TECH BladeRunner II Helicopter

RATING ★★★

PRICE £60 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

This small red helicopter weighs almost nothing, so it's only good for indoor use. It comes with a remote control and charger, and gets about six minutes of flight time from a 20-minute charge.

Flying the BladeRunner is very tricky, and it took us a while to get the hang of it. Even skilled pilots had to cajole it in the correct direction as it constantly strayed off course.

The BladeRunner feels a little flimsy, and we're not sure how long it would survive in the hands of a child. It's clever, but not as much fun as it looks.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

SENNHEISER PXC 150 NoiseGard

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £57 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.electronics-online.co.uk

These normal-looking headphones use clever noise-cancelling technology to remove background noise. The effect is astounding: they easily cut out the sound from our noisy PCs and air conditioners. They won't cut out irregular noises such as speaking, however, so don't expect to silence your family. The headset is powered by a pair of AAA batteries that reside in a bulky tubular case.

The PXC 150 headphones allow you to enjoy more delicate tunes during your journey. They would make an excellent gift for anyone who travels regularly by plane or train.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

ONE FOR ALL Kameleon 6-in-1 Universal Remote Control

RATING ★★★

PRICE £70 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

Remote controls seem to breed. You start out with controls for the TV and VCR, but pretty soon they've spawned children for the Sky box and DVD player. This does away with all of them by replicating up to six devices.

Unfortunately, the Kameleon feels cheap. The finish is tacky and picks up fingerprints. The buttons have little feedback, and it's hard to read the display in a bright room. At this price we would expect something well designed as well as functional.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

PHILIPS Digital Picture Frame

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £170 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.hifibitz.co.uk

This Christmas, many people will take photos on a digital camera. They may print some of the better shots and frame them. A digital picture frame lets you do this in seconds. Just pop your memory card into the frame, and it will store up to 80 images. These are then shown in a continuous slideshow.

The frame is beautiful, with a superb 720x480 display. It also contains a battery, so you can unplug it and pass it round. It's perfect for digital photo addicts, but only those with deep pockets.

REVIEW £50 AND OVER

WOWWEE Robosapien V2

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £200 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.firebox.com

The follow-up to last season's popular Robosapien toy, the V2 is bigger and has a hefty price to match. He's packed with clever features that allow him to interact with his environment. For example, he can detect the colour of objects offered to him. If he detects skin tones, he offers to shake hands.

He can also lie down, sit up and stand again unassisted. A joy pad-style remote controls him directly, though he can be programmed too. The manual is essential reading. A very impressive toy, though not recommended for younger children as some patience is required. **CS**